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MUNDURUCU INDIANS
A Dual System of Ethics

by
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[Title page]

121 **Mundurucú Indians, A Dual System of Ethics**

[101] The Mundurucú Indians, an aboriginal people of central Brazil, share with most of mankind a propensity to apply one moral standard to relationships among themselves and quite another to their conduct towards the rest of humanity. One may say that this phenomenon is universal. This paper shall maintain the view common to many social scientists that ethical values, whether norms implicit in observed behavior or overt ideals, are parts of social systems. It is to be expected, therefore, that desired and valued behavior will be different among members of any one system than between participants in different systems.

In a sense, all members of modern,

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121 complex societies are a part of the same social system. Therefore, the moral values of in-groups are commonly extended outward to a considerable degree. Moreover, the ethical norms reflected in everyday social interaction are complicated by class differences and other categories of sub-cultural variation. The individual is an actor in many situations, each of which prescribes rather different modes of behavior. He may be the bearer of several standards of ethics, which become manifest according to the particular status and role context in which he is acting. Our "real," as opposed to "ideal," values are heterogeneous in the extreme.

The complexity of our ethical values arises from the very complexity of the social structure of which they are an integral part. Beyond the realm of situationally desirable behavior, the general ideal value system, or thematic moral values, in Kluckhohn's terms, shows somewhat more uniformity and internal consistency.[1] But they are frequently in conflict with sentiments, which, while less lofty, are just as strongly value charged.

577 Since it is more simple, and because
186 it is less ambivalent, the Mundurucú ethic should provide some insight into our own. It varies from our own in degree of intensity of ingroup harmony and outgroup hostility and is perhaps

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1 Clyde Kluckhohn, "Values and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action: an Exploration in Definition and Classification" in *Towards a General Theory of Action* (Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, eds., Cambridge, 1952). [P 370 (A)]

577 different in kind, for the central theme
186 makes a sharp and conscious dichotomy between desirable behavior within Mundurucú society and toward the outside world. These opposite aspects of their dual ethic did not conflict but served to reinforce each other and are essential parts of an internally self-consistent view of humanity.

648 The Mundurucú first came to the
[131] attention of colonial Brazil as a tribe of dauntless warriors inhabiting the forests and savannah country east of the upper Tapajós River in the state of Pará. Their reputation for unmitigated ferocity and hostility towards other Indian groups and white settlers grew until 1795, when Brazil authorities established peace with them and diverted their energies into attacks on tribes still unpacified. They achieved considerable success in their service as mercenaries, and by the end of the nineteenth century, there were no hostile Indians within hundreds of miles
[726] of Mundurucú territory. Mundurucú warfare ended with the general pacification of the region in the beginning of this century, and they now pursue a
[105] peaceful existence, hunting, tilling their gardens, and collecting crude rubber for sale to white traders.

181 Mundurucú warfare represents one
577 side of a dually oriented system of ethical values. If one is to view them from this perspective, they appear, to use the descriptive terminology followed by Ruth Benedict, to be true Dionysians.[2] But the internal social order stressed harmony, cooperation, and

[2] Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York, 1946). [p. 370(B)]

181 non-aggression to an extent compa-
577 rable to the Zuni Indians of Arizona; in this light their culture is Apollonian.

121 The apparent disparity between these two concepts of desirable conduct towards one's fellow man points to a weakness in the configurational approach of Benedict and others. According to their interpretation, ethics are a part of a central theme which pervades all aspects of any one culture and endows it with a total and unique pattern. If major ethical themes are analyzed, on the other hand, as being an integrated and integrative part of the social structure, moral values can be related in a functional and pluralistic way to the total culture. Such a dual system of ethics, when viewed functionally, does not have to show ideational consistency, for its rationality lies in the structure of the society and, ultimately, of the culture.

186 The major unifying theme of the Mundurucú view of humanity lies in the division which they make, explicitly and verbally, between those who are Mundurucú and those who are not. Only the former are called "people," while the latter are referred to categorically as "outlanders." In times
[609] past, all "outlanders" were considered to be enemies and proper objects of attack.

This is not a racial or genetic concept; the name "outlander" is frequently applied today to many fellow
[177] tribesmen who have adopted white men's ways to such an extent that they no longer operate within the closed circle of Mundurucú society. Further-

186 more, children were captured from
[597] other tribes and raised as Mundurucú
without prejudice. To adult "outland-
186 ers" of either sex, however, the Mun-
727 durucú gave no quarter; the enemy was
summarily dispatched and the head
severed and taken as a trophy.

The taking of the trophy head was not an end in itself, although it did serve to bring glory to the successful warrior. The enemy head became the subject of a series of ceremonies and ritualistic observances which had as their object the furtherance of the material well-being of all the "people." Beyond this, the Mundurucú derived great pride from their collective strength, and, even today, the older men speak of their warrior days with animation and no little nostalgia.

648 The establishment of peaceful and
177 symbiotic relations with the whites
726 added a further dimension to the
577 values connected with warfare, which
the Mundurucú now pursued as paid allies of the Brazilians. Identification with the cause of the whites and attraction to the material delights of Western culture gave the Mundurucú a "civilizing" mission. They fought only against the "outlanders of the forest," the "savage" Indians, and they construed their role to be one of forceful pacification of these recalcitrants. This added goal provided a rationale for the acceptance of the white man and his culture and served to smooth relations between the two groups during the acculturative process. The
726 means used to attain the new ends were traditional. Enemy villages were

726 burned, men and women killed and decapitated, and children stolen.

721 It has been said that, although individual warriors sought glory, the primary purpose of war was social and only secondarily the gratification of individual egos. The patterns of boasting and vainglory common among North American Indians of the high plains were absent among the Mundurucú. [626 554] 157 A young man who made great claims of prowess was pushed to the fore during the actual attack as a means of suppressing ego-assertion and not to validate it.

181 577 578 The suppression of individual interests in favor of those of the collectivity of Mundurucú is consistent with the dual ethic and world-view of this war-oriented society. The joy and pride that they obtained from external aggression is matched only by the horror aroused by internal strife. A Mundurucú man never struck another in anger. If dissension arose, the principals temporarily avoided each other rather than show open hostility. Intragroup tensions did exist for a variety of causes, among which rivalry over women and fear of sorcery were predominant. The culture provided few internal cathartic mechanisms for latent agression, and, in fact, it enjoined social harmony most positively.

754 [689] The execution of sorcerers was the only situation in which drastic action was taken against another Mundurucú, and the decision to kill the suspected witch had to be taken by the group as a whole. Sorcery and accusations of sorcery were common in all villages, and the subject was so feared that peo-

764 ple were loathe to even speak of it. Interestingly, the sorcerer was not thought to practice his art against particular individuals, but was believed to make and disperse evil spirits which might attack anyone with whom they came into contact. A general malevolence was said to pervade the sorcerer; he was simply "angry at everything."

754 181 577 Sorcery provides interesting insights into the mechanisms by which the Mundurucú ethic was maintained and the dangerous forces which they believed to be inherent in man and nature kept in check. While the practice of black magic may be considered as a covert channel for the latent aggressions of the sorcerer, only persons who had inherited shamanistic power were able to manipulate the evil forces. But the locus of sorcery and its punishment was social and not individual. Just as black magic was directed towards society, at large, so was the ultimate function of retribution of importance to the well-being of the social system.

[724] The universe of the Mundurucú was permeated with potentially harmful supernatural beings and forces, which could be appeased and controlled with proper techniques, and the killing of the sorcerer was a personalized means towards this important end. Furthermore, the generalized anti-social tendencies attributed to the sorcerer were a projection of similar suppressed emotions carried by the population. The destruction of the practitioner of black magic was effectively the destruction of centrifugal tendencies within the society.

181 577 Internal harmony within the house-

[p.372 (B)]

181 Internal harmony within the house-
577 hold and within the village were
476 thought to be a necessary part of social and economic life. The men of the vil-
[562] lage as a whole hunted and cleared forest for gardens in cooperation, and the women of the large, extended family-household carried out their tasks in unity. Foods were shared among house members and by all the people of the village. The individual
[156] and the biological family of man, wife, and children had no independent existence external to their roles within the extended family and the village.

Cooperation and collectivism were recognized as positive, desirable values. A Mundurucú would be ashamed to unstintingly deny goods or services to his fellows. The actual extent and mode of mutual obligations were determined in specific situations by the roles connected with kinship status, but beyond this, the central ethical theme stressed generosity, hospitality, and aid between all Mundurucú.

The suppression of individual strivings is manifest in the total lack of patterns of competition or ego-assertion within Mundurucú culture. A Mundurucú man never strove to prove himself the better of others in any situation. An individual took pride in rec-
[554] ognition as a proficient hunter, a valiant warrior, or a repository of lore, but he did not openly and competitively seek such honors for their own sake. It is to be noted, also, that all of these goals were of value to the society which benefited by it.

534 Although prestige was attainable
156 through the above accomplishments,
577 it was not considered good for a man

554 to stand too far above his fellows. A
156 Mundurucú never boasted of his
577 achievements, nor would he compare himself to others. In fact, it is most difficult to elicit any sort of comparative evaluation of the moral worth of particular individuals from any Mundurucú.

139 The prevailing tone of Mundurucú
577 values is perpetuated in the modern trade situation, for Mundurucú do not
[141] make commercial transactions among themselves. Trade with whites is expected and sought, but those Mundurucú who conduct trade with their fellows as employees of the whites and on behalf of them are recognized to operate outside the ethical system and attract considerable antagonism. Thus, the modern economic ethic of the Mundurucú is colored by the same dualism as existed in their warrior period.

186 The duality of Mundurucú ethics
577 is closely associated with the institutional core or nexus of the culture. Hostility towards the outer world goes beyond mere distrust and suspicion; it is a positive assertion and celebration of the integrity and cohesiveness of the society. While acting as an escape-valve
[721] for intra-social aggressions, warfare served to produce tensions which, paradoxically, contributed towards maintaining balance in the social structure.
[754] Witchcraft may be said to have functioned in much the same way.

181 Manly virtues were esteemed in
577 Mundurucú culture, and hunting ability was valued second only to strength in war. Male unity in a hostile world was expressed in the semi-military or-

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181 ganization of the men's house, which
577 also formed a focus for male social participation. Cooperation in the econ-
[476] omy was elaborated far beyond the minimum necessary for effective exploitation of the environment; warfare
[72] was pursued beyond the requirements of security and its overt magico-religious purposes.

War and fraternity were ritualistic in nature. The relationship between them was causal in the sense that they were interdependent; intense militarism was made possible by male cohesiveness and male cohesiveness was fostered by warfare. Mundurucú society was welded by kinship and the ethic of harmony and cooperation. No
[54] commitments were owed to those outside the system; the humanity of others was recognized, but it entailed no duties. To have extended the intense moral obligations between Mundurucú to persons outside the system would have effectively vitiated and devitalized it.

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